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ABSTRACT

The extent to which the adult basic education (ABE) target population was being reached by Pennsylvania ABE programs was examined along with characteristics of the target group members. To estimate the size of the target population and describe its demographic characteristics, census data from the "1976 Survey of Income and Education" (SIE) were used. ABE student data were taken from the 1978-79 Pennsylvania report which analyzed information forms on every ABE enrollee in state-funded programs. The target population was defined, following federal guidelines, as persons ages sixteen and over, not in school, and having less than a high school education. Comparisons were made between them and the non-target population (others being served by ABE programs). The target population was estimated at 2.7 million, 3% of the over-sixteen population. Findings show 1.2% of the population in communities was served, with the percentage higher for minorities, women, and institutionalized adults. Percentage of least educated target group members (those having completed grades 1 through 4) reached was 4.7 percent. Generally the target population was more likely to be older, married or widowed, and unemployed than the non-target group. It was concluded that given the age characteristics of the target population it may be unrealistic to expect that a large portion can be served and that programs geared toward improving employability may not be relevant to them. Results raise serious questions about the advisability of concentrating resources on the least educated group as regulations suggest. (Implications for recruitment and resource allocation are discussed.) (JT)

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REACHING THE ABE TARGET POPULATION: HOW ARE WE DOING?

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Those of you who are involved in Adult Basic Education programs are no doubt aware of the volume of paperwork these programs can generate. In Pennsylvania, for instance, the Division of Adult and Community Education within the Department of Education annually commissions a management information project to collect data for the ABE programs throughout the state. Teachers, counselors, and supervisors of these programs dutifully and patiently complete data forms and mail them at appropriate times. The data is carefully tabulated, and a few months after the close of the fiscal year, the state and field staffs receive a report summarizing such information as the number of ABE participants, their demographic characteristics, their instructional levels and progress within the program, and so forth. While all this information is important both for federal compliance requirements and for program planning at state and local levels, these data are merely head counts, and as such, tell only part of the story. Unanswered questions remain: What are the characteristics of the target group members? To what degree is the target population being served? How well are we reaching priority groups within it?

Recognizing the need for such information, the Office of Adult and Community Education requested Planning Studies in Continuing Education, The Pennsylvania State University, to undertake a study to determine the extent to which the target population was being reached by ABE programs. This paper summarizes the results of that study, and, in addition, includes some comparisons of the target and non-target populations which were unexpectedly discovered during the progress of the analysis. Implications of the data for resource allocation and recruitment of ABE participants are also discussed.

Data Sources

To estimate the size of the target population and describe its demographic characteristics, census data from the 1976 Survey of Income and Education (SIE) were used. These estimates represent the most recent information available and are more likely to reflect the characteristics of the target population in the 1980s than frequently quoted 1970 census figures.

The Bureau of the Census, in cooperation with HEW, carried out the 1976 survey in order to obtain reliable estimates of the number of children in poverty on a state-by-state basis. Unlike the decennial Census, the 1976 Survey utilized a sample of the population instead of all households. It contained questions relating to current employment, past work experience, income, educational background, school enrollment, disability, and housing. Estimates were judged to be within 10 percent of their true values. This means that while statewide estimates of population characteristics were fairly reliable, estimates for geographic areas or smaller groups within the state were much less so.

ABE student data were taken from the Administrative Survey of Fiscal Year 1978-79 Adult Basic Education Programs in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, which analyzed information forms submitted for every ABE enrollee in state-funded programs. This annual report has two purposes: to allow the state to fulfill federal compliance requirements, and to provide information to assist ABE program planners.

Results

The target population. Following federal guidelines, the ABE target population was defined as persons ages sixteen and over, not in school, and having less than a high school education. Also, persons who were sixteen and older, did not speak English, and were not enrolled in school were included in the target population.

We found that estimating the size of the target population for Pennsylvania was at best problematic. First, the number could be off by as much as 10 percent due to sampling error. Secondly, it was impossible to document the method used to estimate the target population for the 1970 Census. It is likely that 1970 Census questions are not identical to 1976 Census questions. These factors could account for some of the discrepancy which was observed between 1970 and 1976 in the size of the target population. When the 1980 Census is completed, more dependable statistics will be available.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the SIE estimate of the target population was 2.7 million persons. This is down from 3.5 million persons reported in the National Advisory Council on Adult Education's report, A Target Population in Adult Education (1974). In 1970, the target population was estimated at 42.5 percent of the over-sixteen population; in 1976 it was estimated at 31 percent.

In order to gain some perspective on the ABE target population in Pennsylvania, a comparison of the target population and the non-target population was made. The variables presented in Table 1 are those for

Table 1

Comparison of the ABE Target Population and the Non-Target Population for Pennsylvania

Demographic Group	Non-Target Population		Target Population		Percent of Total Demographic Group who are in Target Population
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
Total Adult Population	5,960,437	100	2,720,949	100	31
Sex					
Male	2,805,057	47	1,257,037	46	31
Female	3,155,380	53	1,463,912	54	32
Age					
16-24	1,737,551	29	173,339	6	9
25-34	1,335,859	22	213,759	8	14
35-44	902,274	15	290,594	11	24
45-54	927,809	16	501,584	18	35
55-64	645,607	11	611,738	23	47
65+	411,652	7	930,026	34	69
Race					
Hispanic	24,365	.4	40,306	1	62
Black	370,778	6	302,243	11	45
American Indian	8,338	.1	3,074	.1	27
Asian	14,078	.2	2,709	.1	16
S.E. Asian Refugees	--	--	--	--	--
White/Others	5,542,974	93	2.372,668	88	30
Not indicated	--	--	--	--	--
Marital Status					
Single	1,857,877	31	296,210	11	14
Married	3,522,209	59	1,691,034	62	32
Sep./Divorced	317,485	5	222,763	8	41
Widowed	262,994	4	510,940	19	66
Employed					
Yes	3,532,783	59	991,942	36	22
No	2,420,694	41	1,728,981	64	42
Not indicated	6,990	--	--	--	--

Source: 1976 Survey of Income and Education, U.S. Bureau of the Census, December, 1977.

Note: Census figures under 15,000 are likely to be unreliable because they represent fewer than seventeen persons in the sample.

which we had comparable information on ABE students. In addition, the SIE included many other characteristics, and although they are not shown in this table, we will discuss some of them later.

While some similarities exist, generally the target population was more likely to be older, married or widowed, and unemployed than the non-target population.

The percentages of males and females were approximately equal in both groups. In terms of age, the target population showed 57 percent over fifty-five years of age, whereas the non-target population was much younger. As persons' ages increased, they were more likely to be represented in the target group. For example, 69 percent of adults sixty-five years old or over were in the target population, compared to only 9 percent of the sixteen to twenty-four year olds.

Minority representation in both populations was similar, with the White/Other category comprising the clear majority of each group. Blacks form a higher proportion of the target group than the non-target group. It must be emphasized again, however, that estimates of the smaller minority groups are less reliable because of both sample size and the usual problems in obtaining accurate information for minorities. Looking at each racial/ethnic group individually, we see that a large percentage of the total adult Hispanic and Black populations were target group members, although their overall proportions of the target group were not high.

There were differences in marital status between the non-target and target populations. A greater proportion of the target group was married or widowed. This difference is probably a function of age, as persons fifty-five and older, who constitute a majority of the target population, are most likely to be either married or widowed.

Unemployed persons were 64 percent of the target group, compared to 41 percent of the non-target population. Age again may account for a portion of this difference, since persons sixty-five and older form one-third of the target group, and these persons are not likely to be in the work force.

In addition to the characteristics shown in Table 1, there were a number of other variables that revealed important differences between the non-target and target populations. They are summarized in Table 2. In response to a Census question about their major activity, more non-target persons than target persons reported being employed, while a much larger portion of the target population indicated they were either retired or engaged in housekeeping.

The Census interview also contained an item that asked those persons who had not been employed the previous year to explain their reasons for not working. Results showed that most of these persons in both the non-target and target groups were not looking for work. However, when the responses are combined, a much larger share of the target population gave such reasons as housekeeping, ill or disabled, or retired (93 percent). Only 70 percent of the non-target group indicated

Table 2

Selected Comparisons of Non-Target and Target Persons

Characteristic	Non-Target Population	Target Population
	Percent	Percent
Major Activity		
Employed	55	36
Students	12	--
Retired/Other	8	22
Housekeeping	22	35
Reasons for not Working Last Year		
Housekeeping	50	41
Ill, Disabled	8	24
Retired	12	28
Student	22	--
Couldn't find job	6	4
Education/Experience		
No working experience	29	54
Attended 4th grade or lower	NA	4
Attended 8th grade or lower	NA	16
Income		
Received income from pension, Social Security	8	17
Annual income of less than $6,000	10	29

Source: 1976 Survey of Income and Education, U.S. Bureau of Census, December, 1977.

Note: Census figures under 15,000 are likely to be unreliable because they represent fewer than seventeen persons in the sample.

these reasons.

In terms of education and experience, the target group was much more likely to say that they had no working experience, which means they had not held any single job longer than two weeks. Four percent of the target population had completed fourth grade or less, demonstrating that the least educated group is a very small part of the target population.

It is not surprising that a larger percentage of target persons than non-target persons received income from pensions and social security. Likewise, a much higher percentage of the target population than the non-target group had an annual income of less than $6,000.

All of these data give us a clearer picture of the group of persons ABE programs are attempting to reach. By and large, the most significant characteristic of the target population was its age, and this variable often accounted for other characteristics. Due to the concentration of older persons, the target population was more likely to be ill, disabled, or retired. This population had a lower average income and a weak employment history. At the risk of overgeneralizing, these data suggest that a large portion of the target population are not seeking jobs, and ABE or GED programs geared toward improving employability may not be relevant to them.

Least educated target group members. Recent federal regulations, which in turn are incorporated in Pennsylvania's state plan for adult education, have called for greater outreach of ABE programs to the least

educated portion of the target population. In Pennsylvania, the least educated group is often defined as those members of the target population who have completed grades one through four. Using this definition, we decided to analyze this group separately from the remainder of the target population because we wanted to learn more about its composition in light of its priority status. According to the 1976 survey, this least educated group encompassed about 123,000 people, or 4.5 percent of Pennsylvania's target population. Because it is a small group, it is important to remember that census estimates on some variables are less reliable. The most significant characteristic of the group was its age: 75 percent were over sixty-four years old, compared to about a third of the rest of the target population. Consistent with this finding is the fact that only a small portion of the least educated group were employed. When asked why they didn't work the previous year, 32 percent of the least educated group responded that they were ill or disabled, while another 29 percent were retired. The vast majority (85 percent) received Social Security or railroad retirement benefits. Generally, the least educated group had a lower income level than the remainder of the target population. Forty-four percent earned less than $6,000 annually, compared to 29 percent of the target population as a whole.

Two demographic variables revealed little difference between the least educated group and the target remainder. Both groups had identical proportions of males and females. When the groups were divided according to race/ethnicity, we saw similar representation of minorities, with a somewhat higher percentage of Blacks in the least

educated group than in the target remainder.

The results of this analysis raise serious questions about the advisability of concentrating resources on this group as the regulations suggest. First of all, the least educated group is relatively small, and due to its age and/or physical condition, it is unlikely that many would or could ever participate. Additionally, it is important to consider the potential benefit to society of serving this group. While ABE attendance would undoubtedly enrich the lives of these participants, it would probably not lead to any increase in the employment rate or decrease in the number on public assistance. Likewise the cost per student of serving the least educated would be relatively high in comparison to that for other ABE clients.

We are not suggesting that this group be ignored. One way of encouraging their participation might be through working more actively with senior citizens groups or Area Agencies on Aging. However, we are questioning whether the least educated group should be emphasized to the neglect of other educationally disadvantaged adults.

Target Population and ABE Students

Having compared the target and non-target populations, we now want to move on to a discussion of Pennsylvania's ABE students. Specifically, we were interested in two things: comparing the characteristics of the target and ABE student groups, and determining how well Pennsylvania ABE programs are doing in reaching the various subgroups within the target population.

Because the SIE surveyed households and not institutions, we did not include any institutionalized ABE students in this analysis. Approximately one fourth of ABE students in 1978-79 were in institutional programs, and they will be described later.

Table 3 summarizes the comparison of the ABE target population and ABE students enrolled in community programs in 1978-79. As you can see, ABE programs served approximately 1.2 percent of the target population. Some categories within the target group were served better than others, although no more than 9 percent of any one group was served. Asians appeared to be an exception, with 22.2 percent attending ABE classes. However, because the number of Asians is so small, it is likely that estimates for this group are not dependable.

Statewide, ABE programs reached females better than males, with 1 percent of the male target population and 1.3 percent of the females enrolled in classes. Sixty percent of last year's ABE students were women.

When the ABE population was divided into age categories, more differences in the rate of service appeared. As ages rose, the percentage served decreased dramatically. The sixteen to twenty-four age group, which represented only 6 percent of those eligible for ABE, formed 48 percent of the ABE enrollees. While 34 percent of the target population was sixty-five or older, only 6 percent of those enrolled in ABE programs were in this group. The percentage of the target population served, then, dropped from 8.8 percent of the sixteen to

Table 3

Comparison of the ABE Target Population and Students Enrolled in Community ABE Programs in FY 1978-79

Demographic Group	Target Population		ABE Students		Percent of Target Population Served
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
Sex					
Male	1,257,037	46	12,431	39	1.0
Female	1,463,912	54	18,844	60	1.3
Not indicated	---	--	323	1	--
Age					
16-24	173,339	6	15,186	48	8.8
25-34	213,759	8	7,557	24	3.5
35-44	290,594	11	3,815	12	1.3
45-54	501,584	18	1,824	6	.4
55-64	611,738	23	906	3	.1
65+	930,026	34	1,870	6	.2
Not indicated	---	--	440	1	--
Race					
Hispanic	40,306	1	2,091	7	5.2
Black	302,243	11	8,881	28	2.9
American Indian	3,074	.1	58	.2	1.9
Asian	2,709	.1	601	2	22.2
S.E. Asian Refugees	---	--	988	3	--
White/Other	2,372,668	88	17,633	56	.7
Not indicated	---	--	1,346	4	--
Marital Status					
Single	296,210	11	15,370	48	5.2
Married	1,691,034	62	10,017	32	.6
Sep./Divorced	222,763	8	3,759	12	1.7
Widowed	510,940	19	1,130	4	.2
Not indicated	---	--	1,322	4	--
Employed					
Yes	991,942	36	10,626	34	1.1
No	1,728,981	64	19,299	61	1.1
Not indicated	---	--	1,673	5	--
Total Number of Students	2,720,923	--	31,597	--	1.2

Source: 1976 Survey of Income and Education, U.S. Bureau of the Census, December, 1977, and Sebring, et al. Administrative Survey of Fiscal Year 1978-79, Adult Basic Education Programs in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University, 1979).

Note: Census figures under 15,000 are likely to be unreliable because they represent fewer than seventeen persons in the sample.

twenty-four year olds to .2 percent of the sixty-five and over group. ABE programs definitely seemed to attract a young group of enrollees.

The minority breakdown also indicated some differences in the service rate to each group. Disregarding Asians, Hispanics were the minority group best served, at 5.2 percent. Blacks were also well represented among ABE enrollees. Their portion of the total group increased from 11 percent of the target population to 28 percent of the ABE population. The White/Other category was served least well, as its percentage dropped from 88 percent of the target group to 56 percent of those enrolled.

In terms of marital status, it appeared that single persons were over-represented among ABE enrollees. Forty-eight percent of ABE enrollees were single, as compared to 11 percent of the target population. There is undoubtedly a correlation between age and marital status, because sixteen to twenty-four year olds were also over-represented in the ABE population, and many people in this group are likely to be single. Married and widowed persons were not served nearly as well, and this is probably related to the fact that these groups tend to be older and therefore less likely to participate.

The only breakdown that was similar in both the target and non-target populations was the representation of employed and unemployed persons.

Institutionalized ABE Students

Over 9,000 ABE students attended programs in institutions and therefore were not included in the preceding discussion and analysis. Institutional programs were located in county prisons, state correctional institutions, mental hospitals, and institutions for the handicapped.

While students in institutions were similar in some ways to ABE participants in community programs, there were some striking differences. The most salient characteristic was the fact that 78 percent of all institutionalized students were males. This finding is to be expected, since men form the clear majority in most institutions.

Predictably, the largest proportion of institutionalized students were single, and 88 percent were unemployed. Age and racial breakdowns revealed patterns similar to those found in the community programs.

Due to the lack of current Census information from Pennsylvania institutions, it is impossible to assess the percentage of the target population served in institutions. Indications from a 1970 Census report on institutions are that the target population is sizeable—probably around 70 percent of the residents and inmates. Results from the 1980 Census should provide an accurate measure of the institutional target population.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Let's return now to our original question: How are we doing in our efforts to reach the target population? In Pennsylvania last year 1.2

percent of the target population in communities was served by state-funded ABE programs. For minorities and women, the percentage was somewhat higher, which is evidence that attempts to reach two of the recently defined priority groups are meeting with some success. In addition, another priority group, institutionalized adults, was also served at a respectable level--they were one fourth of all ABE students.

ABE programs enrolled 5,750 participants at the one-to-four instructional level, and this represents roughly 4.7 percent of the least educated group within the target population. This is further evidence of success in serving a priority group identified by the regulations.

Clearly, the vast majority of the target population is not being reached by ABE. Given the age characteristics of the target population, however, it may be unrealistic to expect that a large portion can be served. Besides demographic factors, there are attitudinal factors that we have not even considered. It is likely that a large share of the target population is not interested, does not want, or does not need ABE classes. This is exactly what was found by an Ohio study that interviewed persons eligible for ABE (Boggs, 1979). Of those persons who knew of ABE, only a small percent said they would enroll in classes. Older persons often indicated that they felt they were too old. These considerations raise doubts about the utility of the legal definition of the target population.

The legal definition could be unrealistic for another reason as

well, for it does not include adults who may be high school graduates but are still functionally illiterate. Conversely, non-graduates have later functioned very successfully in society. It may be worthwhile, then, to consider some other definition.

A recent study in Pennsylvania completed by Northcutt (1979) used APL criteria to define the target population. He estimated that approximately 30 percent of the adult population functioned at the APL 1 level and were most in need of ABE programs, a finding comparable to our study. While the APL definition takes into account the functional levels of adults, it still does not address the problem of willingness to participate.

The National Advisory Council (1978) has proposed that, instead of the legally defined target population, the states should try to assess the demand population, defined as "those adults 16 years of age and older experiencing personal and societal disadvantage due to inadequate basic education who actually want, demand and are capable of using adult education." If this definition were used it is likely that Pennsylvania ABE programs would achieve service to a higher percentage of the demand population than to the target population.

The use of the demand population definition is not without problems, however, because it would have to be adopted on a nationwide basis, with standardized measurement methodology. In addition, there is the possibility of excluding adults who indicate no interest in ABE simply because they are not aware of its potential benefits.

Nevertheless, while it may not prove feasible to actually use this definition, it is certainly important for program planners to recognize that it is doubtful that a very high proportion of the legally defined target population would ever participate.

We were specifically asked to make recommendations based on this research. What follows is a discussion of recruitment that comes from both our research and that of other persons.

Because of time limitations, we aren't able to discuss many aspects of attracting and retaining students in this paper. For those wishing more detailed information, there are several handbooks listed in the bibliography that describe specific recruiting techniques. Several more general items that are important to any recruitment and retention effort deserve mention, however, and we do want to spend some time discussing these.

Data from the 1978-79 Administrative Survey in Pennsylvania indicated that only 10 percent of the students heard of ABE through the media, whereas a majority were informed of ABE through some type of personal contact. This implies two things: media usage should be more carefully designed in order to effectively relate to the target population, and ABE program planners need to make every effort possible to work closely with agencies, organizations, and individuals who could provide these personal contacts. The use of paid or volunteer recruiters should be considered. A good ABE program can generate contagious enthusiasm among current and former ABE students, and turn them into recruiters.

The importance of working with community agencies and groups cannot be overemphasized. In addition to making referrals, they might also offer such support services as child care, transportation, job placement, and counseling which may enable more adults to participate. Co-sponsoring ABE classes with community organizations can utilize these groups in yet another way.

Tailoring recruitment and program efforts to particular target groups or to regional characteristics will involve selecting from a variety of innovative recruiting techniques and delivery systems. Research results in these areas have not been systematically disseminated. Knowledge of systems that are especially effective with particular groups or regions could aid program planners immensely. Classes combined with senior citizens' programs may appeal to older adults, for instance, while for rural adults, the use of mobile learning labs and homebound instruction has proved effective. The target population contains a large group of homemakers, and they may be attracted by curricula related to the home arts or consumerism.

Based on information received from 1978-79 ABE students in Pennsylvania, the majority enrolled for such concrete reasons as obtaining a diploma or improving job prospects. The ability to demonstrate success in these areas especially to those persons interested in obtaining employment, should be helpful in recruitment efforts.

Two additional factors may improve retention rates. First, program content must be perceived by participants as being both interesting and useful. Competency based curricula may be one promising way to accomplish this.

Secondly, improved communication among students and staff is crucial. Can the student talk about his or her educational goals, needs, and previous difficulties? Is the student involved in planning a learning program? Is the student receiving enough feedback to be able to determine how he or she is doing within the class? Does the feedback process work two ways in order for the staff to evaluate their teaching methods? If the student is having personal problems, is the staff cognizant of them and able to provide support in dealing with them? How much consistent follow up is done once a new student enters a class?

Knowing what others have found valuable is one component in planning a recruitment and retention process. Equally important is evaluating any local approaches tried. Continued refinements and improvements will result from such evaluation.

On the threshold of the 1980s, when the target population appears to be on the decline, the Pennsylvania ABE programs demonstrated success in reaching some priority groups and less success in reaching others. It may be difficult to extend service to some of these priority groups, especially older residents, because they may not represent demand population.

Considering the fact that states have limited resources, difficult choices are in the offing. On the one hand, they could make an effort to serve priority groups that have been difficult to attract in the past, even though there may be only dim prospects of success and resources would be diverted from easier to reach groups. Or, they can continue to serve the priority groups, such as minorities, women, and the unemployed, for whom the prospects of success may be greater, in which case some priority groups would continue to be underserved.

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